

Statewide Persistent Pain Management Network



Persistent Pain Education Series

Your Pain Explained

Your persistent pain is complex and just as unique as you are and no-one else feels pain the same way you do. Pain can affect your life and how you live it (e.g. work, rest, play), therefore it is important to learn how you can take control to get your life back on track.

What is pain?

Pain is an unpleasant and threatening experience that warns about real or possible injury to your body. It is a natural human response which alters your behaviours and actions to protect you from further harm or damage. This **protective response** may be appropriate early after an injury or with disease-related tissue damage, but they are not helpful when pain persists for an extended period. The pain you experience then becomes **associated with heightened warning systems**, including sensitisation of your tissues and the nervous system to both harmful and non-harmful sensations. **Acting together, your nerves, spinal cord and brain gather information from your body and experience to create pain.**

For example, if you touch a hot stove your nervous system will immediately respond by moving your hand away and the pain you feel may be a burn. You then take immediate action (put your hand under cold water) to fix the damage. If the house was on fire, you would run outside, rather than to put your hand under cold water. Your nervous system has the capacity to downgrade or upgrade the threat.

In every situation, your nervous system will make the decision whether or not you should feel pain. It is like a computer, it gathers information (**inputs**) from parts of your body (joints, muscles, tissues, skin, organs), thoughts, feelings and memories as well as what is going on in the world around you (e.g. temperature, rain, danger) and generates an output. Sometimes the **output** is pain, warning you to change the way you think, feel and act.

Why is persistent pain different?

Most of the time, pain is a normal and useful 'alarm' however, when you have persistent pain there are fundamental changes that occur in your nervous system. Normally pain is a message from your nervous system telling you to change the way you behave, think or move.

With persistent pain, **the nervous system has trouble with its 'alarm' and becomes highly sensitive.** Your nervous system continues to gather inputs and makes the decisions. It can therefore take less input to trigger pain, or your nervous system may decide you need to feel pain as a warning, when really the danger is not as significant. It can be like a super sensitive car alarm that goes off when a leaf falls on the car.





What can help?

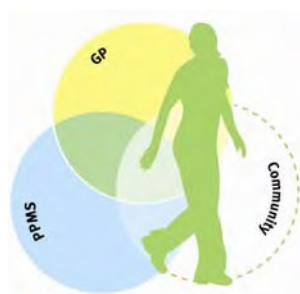
Understand that it is your nervous system which determines whether you feel pain. If you have persistent pain, it is helpful to **learn ways to manage the inputs that influence your pain and to try and change those inputs.**

Your **thoughts, feelings** and **level of physical activity** can affect your persistent pain. Therefore, it is important to work with your local Persistent Pain Service or health professionals with expertise in persistent pain to identify your pain triggers to help you manage your pain.

A **Persistent Pain Service** employs healthcare professionals, including physiotherapists, psychologists and occupational therapists, because **persistent pain is complex** and there are many things that can affect you. It is possible to build your own team with similar healthcare professionals, which your GP can assist.



YOUR NERVOUS SYSTEM MAY MISINTERPRET THE INCOMING INFORMATION AND THE PAIN YOU EXPERIENCE IS INAPPROPRIATE TO THE SITUATION



Key messages

- Your nervous system decides whether you will feel pain based on the information from all around you.
- Your persistent pain is complex and just as unique as you are.
- You can learn what triggers your nervous system to produce your pain.
- You can learn to manage and change the things that trigger your pain.

Additional resources

Read *Understanding Chronic Pain Factsheet (by Chronic Pain Australia)*
<http://chronicpainaustralia.org.au/documents-2/fact-sheets>

Watch *Understanding pain in less than 5 minutes (by Brainman)*
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5KrUL8tOaQs>

Listen *Introduction to Pain (ACI Pain Management Network)*
<https://www.aci.health.nsw.gov.au/chronic-pain/for-everyone/introduction-to-pain>